

# Does Hamlet Have a Death Wish?

## What Really Happens in Act Five



## Does Hamlet Have a Death Wish?: What Really Happens in Act Five

### Marjorie Schulenburg

*Hamlet* is the most often debated and written about of Shakespeare's tragedies. We know that while they may admire the play, some critics, not just a few, find it uneven. Eighteenth Century critics disapproved of the play's "excesses," not the least of which the pile of bodies left on stage as the tragedy ends. T. S. Eliot claimed, among other things, that sufficient motive for Hamlet's suffering in the play, is just not there-- the lack of what he called an "objective correlative."<sup>1</sup> Earlier influential voices like Goethe and Coleridge, found Hamlet too sensitive—too much the artist or the "speculative genius" to take so blunt an action as revenge: hence his suffering and procrastination.<sup>2</sup> More than a century ago, now, Professor Bradley posited the view, still much respected, that Hamlet suffers from *melancholia* as it was known and recognized by Elizabethans.<sup>3</sup>

One of the difficulties in explaining Hamlet's motives and actions in the play, has been more recently articulated by Professor Bloom in his excellent study, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, in Act 5, scene 2, Hamlet, in conversation with Horatio, acknowledges the proven duplicity of King Claudius who not only failed the earlier test of his response to the play within the play but who, we now know, had commissioned the King of England to execute Hamlet upon the latter's arrival on English soil. Hamlet asks Horatio, "Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon . . . Is't not perfect conscience/To quit him with this arm?" (62-67). Why, then, does Hamlet accede to the King's invitation to the duel with Laertes, having more than sufficient proof of the cunning and villainy of which Claudius is capable? And, if we are to believe the Ghost's account, Claudius had already shown himself to be adept in utilizing poison as a weapon.

The answer lies, partially I think in Hamlet's often quoted but still mesmerizing speech about the fall of a sparrow: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. If no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be" (190ff).<sup>5</sup> This statement is in reply to Horatio's suggestion that if Hamlet have any reservations about going through with the match, ('thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart. . . .') he honor them and seek a delay. For the first time, though, Hamlet appears to show a sense of resignation, and many read the concluding command, "Let be," as an answer to the earlier iconic question about life and suffering, "To be or not to be" in Act 3.

Hamlet's "Let be" mentality is easily seen, moreover, as a response to his somewhat new-found view, that we cannot control everything in our lives and that sometimes that is for the good. When describing the pirate attack on their ship and the opportunity, discovered by Hamlet, to contravene the King's

---

<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," *The Sacred Wood* (Oxford: University Press, 1921).

<sup>2</sup> A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, (London, 1904), as quoted in *Major Literary Characters: Hamlet*, Ed. Harold Bloom (New York, Chelsea House, 1990), 64-65.

<sup>3</sup> A.C. Bradley 67.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), 87.

<sup>5</sup> Textual references are to the Norton Critical Edition of *Hamlet*, edited by Robert S. Miola, 2011.

secret request to have him executed, Hamlet philosophizes, “our indiscretion sometimes serves us well / When our deep plots do pall / And that should learn us / There’s a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough-hew them how we will”(5.2.8-11). But is Hamlet, who has been so meticulous in attempting to shape outcomes thus far in the play, (refusing to kill Claudius when he had the chance)—is he suddenly willing just to go with the flow and trust things all to work out? Such a major shift in his outlook and character is less easy to accept in the longer view of the play itself as well as of his character. For this reason, we turn to the events of 5.1 and also to the character of Laertes in discussing the choices Hamlet makes at the end.

In the previous scene, 5.1, Hamlet interviews the gravedigger and engages in one of the most famous ruminations on mortality in western literature. Holding the skull of the court jester, Yorick, whom he had known with fondness as a child, Hamlet remarks that “here hung those lips which I have kissed / I know not how oft “ but that now both the sight and smell of the remains cause his “gorge” to “rise.” He then comments on the irony of human mortality, “to what base uses we may return”(182). These thoughts are a culmination of Hamlet’s earlier preoccupation with physical decay which appears full blown in Act 4 when, feigning distraction, he replies to a question about the whereabouts of Polonius’ corpse: “We fat all creatures else, to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots . . . A man may fish with a worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of a fish that hath fed of that worm. . . .”( 4.3.21-7). He develops that thought further in 5.1 with the observation that someone as great as Alexander or Caesar might, in his state of final dissolution, end up stopping a hole in a wall or beer barrel (185-94).

In the graveyard scene, the *memento mori* theme is truly all encompassing, when Hamlet’s reverie is interrupted by the arrival of the King, Queen, Laertes and others bearing the coffin of Ophelia, whom Hamlet, incidentally, did not even know was dead. Not only does human life end in dust, but the one person with whom Hamlet once envisioned a future of love and procreation, is dead and will be interred right in front of them where Yorick’s skull was found. Hamlet retains self-control until Laertes jumps in the grave and passionately invites them to bury him alive with his sister: “Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead / Till of this flat a mountain you have made / To’ertop old Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus” (229-32). Laertes’ gesture and, particularly, it seems, his hyperbolic comparisons, are too much for Hamlet; he comes out from hiding to ask “What is he whose grief / bears such and emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wandering stars. . . ?” Then he too jumps in the grave, whereupon Laertes attempts to strangle him and the two must be parted forcibly. Hamlet’s own passions are clearly aroused when he asks, “Dos’t come here to whine, / To outface me with leaping in her grave. . . Nay, an thou’lt mouth, / I’ll rant as well as thou”(257-64). Also, with passion, he finally admits, “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum” (249-51).

It is then, with the new awareness of the finality of his own lost love and a reluctant affirmation of the brevity and vanity of human life, that Hamlet makes the choice in 5.2. to participate in the King’s duel opposite Laertes. Does he do it because he no longer cares what happens to him and because death would be a relief? The tone of his remarks suggests otherwise, and the key to unlocking his view lies with the character of Laertes, or at least with Hamlet’s view of Laertes.

We recall that, having returned from the cemetery, Hamlet confides to Horatio about the pirates and the accidental but fortuitous discovery of the king's stratagem which enabled Hamlet to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, instead of him being sent to his own. Hamlet makes note of the role that chance has played in these events and also acknowledges that he now has more than enough grounds to go after Claudius. At this point, the Quarto has Hamlet interject an important comment about Laertes: "But I am very sorry, good Horatio, / That to Laertes I forgot myself / For by the image of my cause / I see the portraiture of his / I'll court his favors. . ." (5.2.9-12); this is in spite of the fact that Laertes had just tried to strangle him in Ophelia's grave.

Hamlet's confrontation with human mortality and physical decay in 5.1 could be enough to explain a fatalistic and nihilistic view of his own future in 5.2. In this connection, Hamlet makes a number of other cynical observations throughout the play that fortify such a view: his mother's mourning for his father was disrespectfully short; the Danes' practice of rousing to the King's health makes the country regarded as drunkards; women make "monsters" (cuckolds) of men; women are "breeders of sinners"; language has become so full of double-meanings, "we must speak, by the card" (5.1.121-2); the lower classes take such liberties that "the toe of the peasant comes near the heel of the courtier" (5.1.123-4); and much more. He expresses clear disillusionment with life on numerous occasions.

Yet it can be argued that, given the vanity of life and Hamlet's own personal losses of his father, his mother (in a sense), and now Ophelia, Laertes becomes important to Hamlet as a symbol of the one thing left in life that is worth fighting for: honor. Laertes is, significantly, recognized as a foil to Hamlet: similar in age, a member of the nobility, and now, also having lost a father. And even in the cemetery, after the physical combat between them, Hamlet says to Laertes, "What is the reason that you use me thus? I loved you ever" (269-70). Hamlet admires his fellow Dane's integrity and therefore does not suspect that Laertes has been compromised by the King. Thus Hamlet enters into the duel in 5.2 open and trusting. Before the actual exchange, Hamlet asks Laertes' pardon in a fairly elaborate speech which concludes: "Let my disclaiming from a purposed evil / Free me so far in your most generous thoughts / That I have shot the arrow o'er my house / And hurt my brother" (209-11). Laertes replies that he is "satisfied in nature," and for the immediate future will "receive your offered love like love / And will not wrong it" (219). Yet we know that he does wrong it and has already conspired with the King to make Hamlet's death look accidental in the course of the combat.

Hamlet's sense of honor is still a compelling force in 5.2, in spite of his disillusionment with other facets of human life, and in a sense it blinds him to the possibility of a snare in the proposed fencing match with Laertes. In an earlier brief and often overlooked scene (4.4), Hamlet, en route to the ship, views Fortinbras and his army passing by in the distance. Hamlet questions Fortinbras' captain regarding the purpose of this mobilization, to which inquiry the Captain frankly replies that the piece of land they are contesting is small and worthless: ". . . it hath no profit in it but the name./To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it" (4.4.19-20). Somewhat unexpectedly, the incident leads Hamlet to expatiate about honor: "What is a man, / If the chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more" (34-36). Regarding Fortinbras' risking the lives of his soldiers and himself for this negligible prize, he then claims,

Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw,  
When honor's at the stake. (4.4.54-7)

Hamlet uses the occasion to chide himself once again for procrastinating in his revenge, but the point about honor is not lost. In the combat with Laertes, Hamlet is contesting against someone he regards as honorable, and even if it does not serve to further his larger mission of revenge, it becomes as chance for self-affirmation.

During the brief window of time taken up by the duel, Hamlet appears sanguine, confident and engaged. He wins the first round of the competition, and it is only when Laertes stabs him during a pause between rounds, that Hamlet senses something more desperate is in play, and the dueling then becomes more intense. As we know, the rapiers are switched so that both Hamlet and Laertes are wounded with the poisoned point. Laertes, knowing that his wound is fatal, and hearing Gertrude's dying claim that she is poisoned from the drink meant for Hamlet, confesses the stratagem and the King's guilt. Hamlet quickly grabs the sword and stabs Claudius as well as forcing the poisoned liquid to his lips. Laertes, in his dying words, begs Hamlet's pardon: "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. . . . (303). Hamlet is finally recognized for his nobility by one whom he had also regarded as noble, and so it is fitting that Hamlet answers Laertes' dying request with a "prayer": "Heaven make thee free of it. I follow thee"(306).

And so Hamlet dies, wishing he had time to say more: "oh—I could tell you—/ But let it be" (311-12). He stood up in honor to his fellow Dane who finally acknowledged Hamlet's own nobility, and, at the end, in a brief moment of opportunity, avenged himself and his father by killing the murderous king. Professor Bloom has suggested that Hamlet is a kind of "resurrected spirit about to die" (117) in his final utterances, a kind of "Man-God," (89) so completely has his consciousness dominated the play. Hamlet expresses concern that the truth be known so that a "wounded name" not live after him, and he approves the ascension of Fortinbras in Denmark: "He has my dying voice" (330). He then articulates his own extinction: " the rest is silence" (332). Fortinbras, upon arrival, appears to recognize Hamlet's preeminent nobility and commands that his body be carried by four captains to the stage, "For he was likely, had he been put on,/To have proved most royal"(370-72).

Hamlet's death comes closer than any other tragic death in Shakespeare, I believe, to true pathos. Hamlet suffered so much and came to understand so much, that we wish he somehow could have been, as Fortinbras says "put on." In the end the audience comes to know that it too must accept the extinguishing of this great spirit and "Let be." Nevertheless, it is honor that motivates Hamlet in 5.2, in spite of the disillusionment that he has articulated throughout and in spite of his focus on mortality and physical decay in 5.1. The fencing match provides a stage for him to stand up in honor against what had been another honorable countryman. It is honor that lifts him up, in our estimation, at the end, so that we truly empathize with Horatio when, upon Hamlet's death, he pronounces what could be the prince's epitaph, "Now cracks a noble heart" (333).